

Cheating on SALT II

By Les Aspin

As the Senate prepares to debate the SALT II agreement, charges that the Russians will seek to evade its provisions are being heard. The charges raise several fundamental questions: How could the Soviet Union go about cheating? How could the United States discover such violations? What would the Soviet Union gain and what would the United States lose if the Russians violated the SALT II treaty?

The SALT II agreement consists of a treaty lasting through 1985 and a protocol lasting through 1980. The treaty provides for a gradual bipartisan reduction in the total number of strategic offensive weapons launchers, including land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM's), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM's) and long-range bombers.

The Soviet Union could try to evade the ceiling on the total number of strategic launchers in three ways: by deploying new types of strategic weapons, by deploying more weapons of the existing types, or by converting non-strategic, tactical weapons into strategic ones.

The first cheating method is the most easily detected.

Introduction of new strategic weapons involves at least five stages: research, development, testing, production and deployment. The current United States ability to detect clandestine activity at any of these stages ranges from fair to excellent.

Deploying additional weapons of existing types is more difficult to monitor, although United States detection capabilities are still very good — particularly detection of missile-carrying submarines and bomber production and deployment.

Detection of land-based strategic missiles is only slightly more difficult. United States satellite photography reliably identifies new ICBM silo construction and the transport of missiles to new deployment sites.

Detection of strategic weaponry converted from nonstrategic weapons not covered by the treaty is more challenging. However, confidence in upgraded weapons would depend on testing, and surreptitious testing of strategic missiles is practically impossible.

There are also verification issues in the protocol.

One protocol provision bans deployment and testing of mobile ICBM launchers. There is no question of American capability to ascertain Russian deployment of a mobile land-based system. Nevertheless, under certain deceptive basing schemes, which involve the construction of hun-

dreds or even thousands of shelters, only a fraction of which contain missiles, verifying the actual number of weapons deployed would be very difficult.

The SALT II protocol also bans flight-testing and deployment of cruise missiles capable of ranges in excess of 1,500 miles. Such a ban is not verifiable. However, current Russian cruise-missile technology is still very primitive.

So far only the potential for undetected violations has been considered. Equally important is whether the Russians would attempt to cheat if they felt cheating would remain undetected.

First, SALT II provides enormous leeway for both sides to pursue strategic programs without cheating. Although the Russians could build substantially larger forces without SALT II, they can still do much under the terms of the treaty. For example, they can direct a greater effort into anti-submarine warfare, which could be perceived as threatening in the United States.

Second, if the Russians became dissatisfied with SALT II after signature and ratification, they still would not necessarily cheat. Several alternatives might seem equally attractive, if not more so: requesting renegotiation of certain provisions; seeking modification of SALT II provisions during the SALT III negotiations, or reneging on part of the treaty.

Third, there would be no Russian political gain without public admission. No one is intimidated by weapons not known to exist. If the Russians did make public the fact of their cheating, enormous political repercussions would result. Washington, for example, might find itself pursuing an unprecedented arms buildup in response to the demands of an aroused American public.

The real dangers stemming from Russian violations of SALT II would arise only if there was a significant military advantage to be gained by cheating.

To upset the so-called balance of terror, the Soviet Union would require many more weapons than are now allowed. It would be impossible for the Soviet Union to acquire enough additional weapons without cheating on so massive and pervasive a scale as to be detected with certainty.

Les Aspin, Wisconsin Democrat, serves on the House Armed Services Committee and is chairman of the oversight subcommittee of the House Select Committee on Intelligence. This article is adapted from the current issue of *Scientific American*.